Arrant Authors: Connections of Sex and Scholarship Between Infamous Literary Women in Early Twentieth Century Europe

by Lisa A. Noble

Assignment Description: Write a research paper for Women in Europe.

Immediately following the repressive Victorian era, the early twentieth century brought an influx of talented and free-spirited women into the European literary scene. From the country estates of England to the salons of Paris, women threw off the mantle of sexual oppression and developed a rare atmosphere of openness and support for one another. Unfortunately, they were not yet widely accepted by the male dominated literary world at large; however, the sense of connection amongst the female authors was a key factor in allowing a pivotal body of feminist scholarship to survive. These friendships and associations between many female early twentieth century European literary figures created a safety net which encouraged honest authorship about female sexuality, while providing a buttress against harsh external criticism and sporadic public censure.

While there were several forms of fellowship which occurred between these women, including the custom of writing letters which were often treasured for years after they were written, the most popular kind of support practiced was the Parisian salon. Ostensibly viewed as a madcap, insubstantial social fling, the artistic salon was in truth a vehicle for many writers and painters to see and be seen. It also served as a meeting ground for people of like minds and sexual interests, providing a safe place for homosexual and bisexual men and women to freely express themselves without fear of reprisal.

An early enthusiast of this trend was Gertrude Stein, an expatriated author and artist of the United States who had moved to Paris in 1903. Born in Pennsylvania in 1874, Stein experienced her first failed love affair with a woman while she was still in college, which inspired her to begin her writing career for therapeutic purposes. A sense of stagnation in her life in New York pushed her into following her brother, Leo, to Paris, where they opened a small art

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Perhaps Barney’s most notorious affair was with Renée Vivien, originally known as Pauline M. Tarn. As a writer, Vivien was known for her use of the rarely found eleven syllable line (hendecasyllable). Extremely prolific for her short decade as a published author, Renée was able to print more than twenty volumes of work, averaging two per year until her death in 1909. Conversely, Barney’s list of works numbers less than a dozen over a sixty year period, and with only two exceptions, are published in French. Unfortunately for Natalie, though, both the relationship and Vivien were short-lived.

Natalie Barney, however, was immortalized in Djuna Barnes’ popular book entitled The Ladies Almanack. A symbolic “Who’s Who” of the Parisian literary arena, the Almanack satirized Barney’s entire salon entourage, including such notable figures as authors Radclyffe Hall and Mina Loy. Not all of Djuna’s work possessed such a light hearted nature, however. Like Stein, Barnes was an American born author who relocated to Paris after attending college and working in the States for a few years. From this time period, one of her early works, called The Book of Repulsive Women, is considered her

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5 Richardson. "Natalie Barney."
debout of lesbian-themed writing, and is filled with dark poetry and drawings. Undeniably, Barnes’ comprehensive body of work that addresses lesbianism is one of the most thought provoking collections available, in spite of the fact that she is widely quoted as denying her own homosexuality. Instead, she claimed that she simply loved one specific woman, Thelma Wood, but was not a lesbian. Some critics suggest that this postulation stems from a fear of being categorized strictly as a lesbian author, with no other literary identity. Although not pigeonholed into lesbian circles, Djuna Barnes has certainly posthumously become widely acknowledged as a feminist icon.

Another notorious attendee of Barney’s salon to reach iconic status was Sidonie Gabrielle Colette, more widely known as just Colette. She was notorious for her stage shows, at such venues as the Moulin Rouge, in which she would share passionate kisses with her female costars while in a mime costume. Her books were full of romance and lust but they were only a mere shadow compared to the tumultuous relationships she endured throughout her life. At twenty years of age, she was married to her first husband, a man named Willy who was fifteen years her senior. He encouraged her to write her first stories, a series of semi-autobiographical tales about a young girl’s sexual exploits with other girls in school. By the time she was forty-five, she’d had dozens of affairs with men and women, was well into her second marriage, and was having a scandalous affair with her eighteen year old stepson.

Middle age, however, did not slow Colette down at all. By 1927, she was known as Frances greatest female writer. The 1930’s brought her membership in the Belgian Royal Academy and a new husband, Maurice Goudak, while the 1940’s saw her election to the Académie Goncourt and the Légion d’Honneur. Some of her most popularly enduring work came after World War II, while she was in her seventies. These include L’Etoile Vesper (The Evening Star) and Le Fanal Bleu (The Blue Lantern), as well as her most well-known book in the United States,

12 Witherbee. "Djuna Barnes."
13 Moyes. “Barnes, Djuna.”
Gigi, which was made into a movie starring Audrey Hepburn. Throughout her eighty-one years, she published more than fifty books. Colette was so loved by the French people that when she died, after the Catholic Church denied her a Christian burial, she became the first woman writer to be honored by a state funeral.

Although not a part of the artistic salons in any way but reputation, Radclyffe Hall was an iconic author for lesbian and feminine rights during the early twentieth century. Her infamous book, The Well of Loneliness, chronicled the passions of a teenage girl who had an affair with an older woman. Even though it was not her first book addressing lesbianism, it captured the attention of the London magistrate Sir Biron, who decreed that all copies of the volume were to be destroyed because of its obscenity. The book’s notoriety was due in part to the nature of the subject, but also because Hall considered the main character to be a “sexual invert.” This controversial concept, made popular by Havelock Ellis, identifies homosexuality as irrepressible for those whom are born into the wrongly sexed body. Hall, who lived with her companion, Una Troubridge, for twenty-eight years, as well as indulged in numerous other affairs with women, placed herself firmly in this category. So, as a sexual invert, Hall viewed herself as a man in a woman’s body, unable to change her feelings of attraction for women. In later years, Hall’s espousal of this idea earned her almost as many detractors as supporters. The trial and verdict created an uproar in and out of literary circles, but effectively curtailed Hall from any other controversial or acclaimed publications for the remainder of her life.

In order to show solidarity within the literary community, a local celebrity attended Hall’s trial with the intention of testifying on her behalf. Virginia Woolf, as well as many of her fellow literati associates, was prepared to take the stand in defense of The Well of Loneliness and publicly denounce the obscenity charges against Radclyffe Hall. In spite of this, her appearance seemed to be on principle alone, as Woolf was known to have a somewhat low opinion of Hall as an author. Less flamboyant than many of her contemporaries, Virginia came from an intellectual background, and learned a great deal about literature at a very young age. While in her late twenties, Woolf became a founding member of the Bloomsbury Group, a collective of such

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17 Ibid.
21 "Hall, Radclyffe." Britannica Biographies.
22 Parkes. "Lesbianism, history..."
authors as Lytton Strachey, E.M. Forster and Roger Fry. 

Never widely viewed during her lifetime as a lesbian writer, Woolf primarily wrote essays, literary criticisms, and a unique form of stream of consciousness fiction. Nonetheless, one of her most famous works, entitled *Orlando*, is both autobiographical and an homage to a woman named Vita Sackville-West, who was her lover from 1924 to 1928. The book not only addresses such forward thinking concepts as gender identity, it also explores both Jungian and Freudian themes in its use of collective unconscious and symbology. On a more personal level, the book was a thinly veiled attempt to court love and honor Sackville-West and entice her back.

Combining internal and external dialogue, poetry, and prose, Virginia’s final novel, *Between the Acts*, illustrates her continued desire to push the boundaries of her writing. Unfortunately, unable to cope with self-doubts and bouts of depression, she

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26 Women’s History. “Virginia Woolf.”


lined her coat pockets with stones, and drowned herself in a river, so *Between the Acts* was not published until shortly after her suicide in 1941. Also published posthumously were her diaries and letters, which offered a glimpse into the inner sanctum of her thoughts and perspectives. These represented two of Woolf’s most prolific areas of written work, numbering more than six full volumes of each.

A favorite correspondent as well as intimate friend of Virginia’s was Vita Sackville-West, although Woolf was by no means her first female lover. Vita married her childhood suitor, Harold Nicolson, under what can be considered “open marriage” terms. During their lives together, both Harold and Vita consistently partook in same-sex consensual extramarital affairs. One of her first long term relationships with a woman began in 1918, with her childhood friend, Violet Keppel Trefusis. The relationship was to last for years. During the early 1920s, Sackville-West and Trefusis were notorious for running away together for months at a time. Nevertheless, all through her periodic absences, she would maintain a daily letter writing habit back home to Harold, which always eventually led to the women being followed and brought home by Vita’s husband.

After the end of her affair with Violet, Vita wrote her autobiographical novel *Portrait of a Marriage* as an effort to assuage her homosexual desires on paper instead of in life. By 1924, she

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30 Ibid, pg. 131-134.
had joined the Bloomsbury group\textsuperscript{31} and begun to pursue Virginia Woolf. While their intimate relationship seems to have only lasted about four years, over the next eight to ten years, three of her bestselling novels were subsequently published by Woolf’s company, Hogarth Press. By the early 1930s, however, Vita seemed to have settled down, and spent her remaining years writing books and columns about gardening\textsuperscript{32}.

There are at least two more women in particular that are noteworthy. First is a woman named Annie Winnifred Ellerman, but more widely known by her pen name of Bryher. She, too, was one of the revelers at Gertrude Stein’s salon in Paris, and unapologetically lesbian. Before her death in 1983, the prolific author had written uncounted poems and pieces of fiction, but she was most notorious for her lifelong affair with Hilda Doolittle\textsuperscript{33}, whom also bears mentioning. Ezra Pound’s insulting slash of Doolittle’s name during the editorial of her piece, \textit{Imagiste}, pushed her to permanently shorten her pseudonym to H.D.

Conflicted about gender issues her entire life, H.D. had tumultuous marriages, as well as affairs with both men and women, and even spent a few years in therapy with Dr. Sigmund Freud. It was only late in life as well as after her death that she attained any real recognition as a writer within the literary community\textsuperscript{34}.

In essence, however, H.D. was not alone in receiving a lack of critical acclaim or acknowledgment during her prime writing years. Many of the women from this interconnected net of authors were panned by critics as not being as talented as their male peers. For example, in 1915, Virginia Woolf’s close friend and Bloomsbury Group fellow, E.M. Forster, said in a review of \textit{The Voyage Out}, “Mrs. Woolf’s success is more remarkable since there is one serious defect in her equipment: her chief characters are not vivid. … Mrs. Woolf’s vision may be inferior to Dostoyevsky’s... but she sees as clearly as he where efficiency ends and creation begins.”\textsuperscript{35} Even as recently as 1949, her critics said that she failed: “There is a crucial fault in Mrs. Woolf’s grasp even of this tradition, for she comprehends it one-sidedly, and perhaps in much too feminine a fashion, not as a complete order but first and foremost as an order of sentiments.”\textsuperscript{36} It wasn’t until the 1970’s that her recognition of her literary acumen became consistent.

Brutal criticism of this network of authors did not stop with Woolf. Gertrude Stein was told at one point that she was essentially un-publishable\textsuperscript{37}. Even Radclyffe Hall suffered at least one harsh critique: Virginia’s disparaging comments about Hall’s writing ability during the obscenity trial, in which she is quoted in the essay as saying she doubted Hall’s qualifications as an author.

\textsuperscript{31} Women’s History. “Virginia Woolf.”
\textsuperscript{32} Mazzucco-Than. "V. Sackville-West."
\textsuperscript{34} Zilboorg C. Hilda Doolittle.
\textsuperscript{35} E.M. Forster. \textit{Daily News and Leader} (reprinted in Twentieth Century Literary Criticism, Vol. 5 with permission of King’s College, Cambridge and the Society of Authors as the literary representative of the Estate of E.M. Forster), April 8, 1915.
\textsuperscript{36} Philip Rahv, “Sketches in Criticism: Mrs. Woolf and Mrs. Brown.” \textit{Image and Idea} (copyright 1949 by Philip Rahv; copyright renewed © 1976 by Betty T. Rahv, as widow of the author; preprinted by permission), \textit{New Directions}, 1949, pp. 139-143.
\textsuperscript{37} Maurer. "The Unconventional,
author because she was “too polemical.”

Still, most of these female literary personas offered one another support, encouragement and fellowship within their group, instead of competition. They gave one another connection, and in some cases, companionship. In spite of the obscenity trial, or the scathing reviews, they managed to bolster one another in a free expression of sexuality, both on the page and in life; regardless of cultural expectations about marriage, child rearing, or education, these women found solidarity with each other, and left behind a literary legacy much richer because of it.

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38 Parkes. "Lesbianism, history…"

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